

2013 Joseph Nechvatal interview by Edwin Kelly for *Versejunkies: the journal of intersemiotic translation 1.2* : a journal dedicated to the theory and practice of translation across mediums



Joseph Nechvatal, *autOmata retinal* (2011) 66x44”” computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

*EDWIN KELLY: In the introduction to the book Selected Essays 1981-2001 by Peter Halley, Richard Milazzo describes Joseph Nechvatal's theoretic output as a systematic onslaught of critical theory. (Halley, Peter Selected Essays 1981-2001, Edgewise Press. 2013, pp. 34 – 35) Since 1986 Joseph Nechvatal has worked with ubiquitous electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. His computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 he worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on The Computer Virus Project: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 he extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through his collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora.*

*Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiA) University of Wales College, Newport, UK where he served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiA Research Conference entitled Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era (July 1997);*

*an international conference which looked at new developments in art, science, technology and consciousness. From 1999 to 2013, Nechvatal taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA). His book of essays Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality (1993-2006) was published by Edgewise Press in 2009. In 2011 his book Immersion Into Noise was published by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. His archive is housed at The Fales Library (Downtown Special Collection) at N.Y.U. in New York City. I thought it might be interesting to ask you first if you could chart, in a broad fashion, how your working process has changed over your career? Have instances of technological breakthrough changed your working practise?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: Certainly the digital revolution changed my process early on in terms of technique, but my early analog drawings and paintings had the same thematic intention as my latest digital work: the attempt to conjure, or render, a glimpse into an enigmatically layered and lively world that I sense, and know, to be reality; an energetic vibratory world of almost dreadful depth. In this respect, my process of making computer-robotic assisted paintings and animations have, until recently, been made up of an excessive concoction of ambiguous sexual body parts (morphed from both sexes) tied to the viral form. Philosophy has been, and is, a way of freeing myself enough to connect with this depth so as to process the phantasmagorical aspects of reality into art. This process of art making, for me, must hinge on a dynamic engagement, and then wedding, of image production and image resistance. The idea is to encourage subversive readings of computational media by presenting an artistic consciousness that articulates contemporary concerns regarding safety, truth, identity and objectivity.

EDWIN KELLY: Could you name some of your key philosophical texts? Has the tendency been a voracious reading and agreement with certain texts leading to dramatic breakthroughs, or is the process slower and more considered leading to marginal switches in direction or focus?

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: The creative process is a long and slow one for me. Such a list would be extensive and unsystematic, but I will be happy to cite a few key texts that spoke directly to me as an artist along the way. Early on in the 70s there was *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, Xenophanes's *Fragments: Xenophanes of Colophon*, Watts's *The Joyous Cosmology, Principal Doctrines* by Epicurus, Duchamp's ideas about painting as a conceptual process, Cage's *Silence* and Schelling's *The Philosophy of Art*. At Columbia I studied Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with Arthur Danto and then took interest in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Then came Sontag's *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, *The Birth of Tragedy* by Nietzsche (then all of Nietzsche) and Crowley's *Magick in Theory and Practice*.

In the 80s I plunged into Artaud's *Selected Writings*, Bataille's *Visions of Excess*, Baudrillard's *The Ecstasy of Communication* and Virilio's *Pure War*. All of these texts were shaping me, but chief among them was Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

Others that followed would be Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Ricoeur's *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, and Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Lately I have been inspired by Manuel de Landa's breathtaking book *Philosophy & Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* in which he explores simulations of emergence in systems of different scales, from the atomic to the social. He goes into the cellular automaton as a general principle as the basis of geology and tribal organizations and much much more. Also key has been Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* and Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*.

*EDWIN KELLY: Looking at your work in a broad sense, I'm struck by how much an idea of inter-semiotics can be usefully employed as descriptive of some of your practise. There is a blurring of semiotic codes. It goes further perhaps, becomes almost inter-synaesthetic. Is this a fair description? Is it an aim of your work to undertake this blurring?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: What you say concerning interpenetration is certainly correct. Yes. But it is more of a result of past interests and commitments than of a new conscious strategy on my part. So I perhaps need to contextualize this interpenetration a bit to give you some deeper background on this.

My early interest in inter-semantic-penetration came from my involvement in the No Wave scene in New York City while archiving for La Monte Young back in the late-70s and early-80s. The No Wave Colab (Collaborative Projects) scene was wildly interdisciplinary: visual artists playing in bands, acting in plays and films, writing poetry and theory, shooting Super-8 film, video, sculpture and audio while hanging out together at Clubs like Tier 3 and The Mudd Club. During the No Wave period, I was also reading Nietzsche while studying philosophy at Columbia University. It was in that fecund atmosphere that I decided that I would strive to interweave the two major trends in the history of art: the Apollonian and Dionysian. As you perhaps know, Nietzsche's aesthetic usage of these concepts first appeared in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's premise was that the fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian artistic impulses are needed to form artistic tragedies. It is through a dialectical interplay of these two opposing - and at the same time complementary - aesthetic elements that my art owes its continuous allegiance to Nietzsche and the No Wave.

Nietzsche had famously assimilated the Apollonian and the Dionysian together under the name of an experience of art. By fusing the loose chaotic freedom of No Wave with the structured minimal conceptualism of a La Monte Young, I aimed to fuse hot post-conceptual chaotic disturbance with cool conceptual forms.

My smooth gray palimpsest drawings from that post-punk period - and the slick photo-blowups of the drawings - were an attempt at situating art somewhere between the surface of cold conceptualism and the chasm of shattering incoherence of post-conceptualism, where we must each pick through the meshwork and recover figurative meaning out of entangled ground.

*EDWIN KELLY: The relationship of conceptualism/post-conceptualism to visceral/physical response is one that I would love to hear your thoughts on, especially for your own work.*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: This conceptual/post-conceptual interplay approach still relates to my recent *viractual* noise work - with its virtual and actual intermixtures - as outlined in my book *Immersion Into Noise* (2011) where I map out a broad-spectrum of aesthetic activity I call the *art of noise* by tracing its past eruptions where figure/ground merge and flip the common emphasis to some extent. *Immersion Into Noise* concludes with a look at the figural conceptual aspect of this aesthetic lodged within the non-conceptual ground of human consciousness.

*EDWIN KELLY: The engagement with No Wave seems key to your work in so many ways. Two quotes from your "Toward an Immersive Intelligence" article (2001) come to mind: "I would suggest that there is a widespread human desire to pursue extended consciousness through immersive excess." and "The strategy of "hyper-anything" is based on principles of networked connections and electronic links, which offer multiple choices of paths to follow and continually new branching possibilities."*

*Though you are talking here about an immersive "optic" central to VR, it seems it might also apply to an immersion in a scene or movement, however loose, and the networked connections and electronic links could well be the connections and links of a group of loosely affiliated artists. There are differences in the form of diffusion that occurs, of course - involvement in the group*

*creating a form of extended social consciousness perhaps, whereas the immersive optic works more at the neuro-physiological level. Perhaps, again, these descriptions are too restrictive?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: You present a very accurate reading of the immersive impulse in terms of that art scene. Your ideas do not restrict mine; indeed they expand them, so long as we remember to consider them as gradient experiential levels of aesthetic life. Collaborations, like immersions, surround us when we dive into them. They require a degree of suspending disbelief for an interval of time, as when one's attention gets wrapped up in something compelling when using one's own interpretative imagination. They both require trust.

As with art, reductive explanations of consciousness have proved impossible. And as Marcel Duchamp said, the fact that ready-mades are regarded with the same reverence as objects of art probably means he failed to solve the problem of trying to do away entirely with art. Thus, my ideas of art collaboration and artistic immersion can take on wide aesthetic interpretations.

Of course, I am very interested in collaboration with machine culture – but on an unequal basis: where the artistic choices of the human artist are the dominant factors in viractual collaborative acts.

*EDWIN KELLY: In Immersion into Noise, you speak interestingly about immersion with regard to your studies of cave art. Was it through your readings of Bataille you came to regard their importance to your own work?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: Georges Bataille was indeed an early pointer for me towards the prehistoric art of Lascaux. I put a photo of Bataille inside the Lascaux cave on the cover of the catalogue I did with Didier Gagneur called *Excess in the Techno-mediocratic Society* that was based on a show I curated for the Arbois Museum in 1992.

*EDWIN KELLY: Could you speak a little about the importance of cave art to your work?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: I got special permission to visit the Lascaux cave in 1998 for my Ph.D. research - and the Apse (Abside) portion of Lascaux came to exemplify my notion of visual hyper-noise for *Immersion into Noise* with the physically contained (but optically boundless) palimpsest-esque, all-over, wall-paper-like image spread that I experienced in the Apse. For *Immersion into Noise* that experience coupled up with my No Wave drawing-based period to suggest a theory of *eye noise*: a distinct visual-cognitive proclivity that addresses the multiplicitous/heterogeneous impetus within a visual aggregate.

The Apse is a roundish, semi-spherical, penumbra-like chamber (like those adjacent to Romanesque basiliques) approximately 4.5 meters in diameter covered on every wall surface (including the ceiling) with *thousands* of entangled, overlapping, engraved drawings. The ceiling of the Apse (which ranges from 1.6 up to 2.7 meters high as measured from the original floor height) is so completely and richly bedecked with such engravings that it indicates that the prehistoric people who executed them first constructed a scaffold to do so.

To me, this indicates that the Apse was an important and sacred part of the cave and the fact that it contains a semilegible comprehensive index of all of the forms of representation found scattered throughout the entire cave suggests to me that it is Lascaux's veritable noise vision center.

Describing it, Bataille said that it was one of the most remarkable chambers in the cave but that one is ultimately disappointed by it. I was not disappointed, however. Indeed, what pleased and fascinated me about the Apse was precisely its cryptic and foreboding, overall hypertotalizing, iconographic character granted by its boundless, palimpsestesque, wall-paper-like image explosion (what Bataille called its *fouillis*) of overlapping, near non-photo-reproducible stockpiled drawings from which, when sustained visual attention is maintained, unexpected configurations visually emerge. Here animals are superimposed in chaotic

discourse, some fully and carefully rendered, others unfulfilled and left open to penetration by the environment, all commingled with an extraordinary confused jumble of lines. Its extensive use of superimposed multiple-operative optic perception presents the viewer with noise vision par excellence: no single point of reference, no orientation, no top, no bottom, no left, no right, and no separate parts to its whole. Such visual-thought is *homospacial* noise vision, then. This homospacial quality is deeply suggestive of the non-spatial character of consciousness itself.

As a result of this homospacial noise vision of the Apse, I had the peculiar feeling of being flooded by a cloud-like image cesspool of deep meanings I could not decode, as if I were in the midst of a model of the universe as implicate pattern. As such, it seemed an imposition onto Paleolithic culture of the very thing that should destabilize it: nihilism. Nihilism, in that it is no longer a matter of heterogeneous figuration, but of scanning a homospacial criss-crossing and oscillating battle scene between interwoven figures, immersed in their ideational ground with which they have merged in a deliberate process of constitutional defiguration. There is no longer any space outside of the figures to define them and, hence, in a mental reversal, space is immersed in the overlapping figures.

The nihilistic cancellation at work here, then, seemed to be an attempt to deny the validity of subject/object understanding. Thus Apse seems to call upon the viewer to construct a new mnemonic psychological interpretation based on its tightly woven, intricate abundance, that is, its latent excess. With this meta-nihilistic mega-symbol's boundlessness, the Apse appeared to me the most sacred of the cave's sacred places. Certainly, easy conceptions of one beautiful being as distinguished from another (in specificity) are denied and an aberrant invalidation takes place where previous concepts of the finite and the infinite implode (as do concepts of the voluminous and the vacuous) into a unified field of multiple-reproductive disembodied existences.



This, then, is a sacred/sexual place of personal intrascoping and transformation (by reason of its creative noise vision and anticipated self-cancellation) as its beautiful representational anti-depictions are neither here nor there but overlap. Clearly, what I am saying about the Apse runs counter to the heart of positivism, a paradigm under which we continue to toil unconsciously, as the positivist ideal is a search for rational, systematic thought where images can be broken down, explored, understood, and explained. Here, in the Apse, we seem to have encountered an irrational systematicism that seems to critique reason, a systematic critique that predates (and in some places overlaps) the modern positivist attitude towards sensation. Here, we are inside a homospatial site of over running flux and of hybridization: a place for the rejection of realism and its values (or at least a place to save oneself from the futile and finally unreasonable claims of dogmatic realism and rationalism). The Apse, then, represents a thrusting off of optic and mental boundaries and is thus a complex mirroring of our own fleeting impressions which constitute the movement of our consciousness, the perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. Here, we are not static and have no use for reductive concepts or practices, but are inside a noise space that carries its own nihilistic opposite within itself.

Assuredly, vision here is no longer the controlling power over animals in nature but, on the contrary, vision itself is engulfed in nature's womb. The motivational force which quickens the Apse, then, seems to be a desire to undermine perpetual vision and replace it with another type of impregnable (immersive noise) vision, or at least to suggest that there may be other types of vision possible. Its nihilistic excess serves the positive function of questioning the validity of the customary appearance of things and to make connective understanding inextricably felt. Indeed, the basic function of the visual turbulence of the Apse, from the connective perspective, is to precisely shake our conviction that our visual thinking is sound and to hold any such assured convictions, rather, in suspension. Hence it is only routine that formal issues (where consciousness may be said to be

self-referential and self-sufficient) would arise over any humanist narrative ethic, as the Apse is more concerned with a recycling of psychological energy than with optically correct astuteness. Hence, freed from representational obligations, dark chaotic powers of consciousness are unleashed via the Apse's repressed excessive exuberance

*EDWIN KELLY: Paradoxically, sensory perception seems almost secondary to the experience you are describing here, or perhaps not secondary, but there seems some totalising aspect of the senses at play. It might be fruitful to consider and respond to this quote from George Szirtes: "Each of the arts addresses the world in its own way, apprehending whatever part of it is pertinent to its mode of apprehension. But there is much in common between them, if only because the senses are not entirely distinct from each other. There is an essential synaesthesia in human perception. It is not nonsense that there is a red sound, or that such and such a sound is hot. Our senses are aspects of our imagination: imagination processes the senses and that inevitably leads to a certain overlap. Metaphor depends on finding points of equivalence between different kinds of sensory experience."*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: Yes I see that; how Szirtes's ideas clearly connect to my interest in the relationship between algorithmic globalization, neuroscience, and the aesthetics of complexity. Here I find deep entanglements that suggest new forms of technologically enabled perception - where both slowness and speed may interact in novel ways.

But of late I have been increasingly interested in a complex visual noise aesthetic seated within the murmur of our data-monitoring environment of background machine-to-machine gigabyte communication. Given this new reality, I felt that I needed to think through and deploy a theory of *noise art* so as to address the embedded data subject within the larger environment of ubiquitous computing cognitive perception.

Unlike Szirtes however, here I became interested in a new contemporary aesthetic labor based in a certain exquisite disconnection, untouchability, and unseeability – an affinity that focuses on a commitment to a nihilistic aesthetic of *becoming imperceptible* (ala the Lascaux Apse) that takes you into embodied and embedded resonance perspectives and into radical immanence. This is an aesthetics of perception that is bent on combining the neo-materialist vibrant world with a wider vision of political data awareness that includes private, spiritual, ecstatic or numinous themes accessible through the generative subjective realm of each individual; an aesthetics of perception politics based on resonance - not a politics of visibility - which reveals in minute particulars the full spectrum of the extensive social-political dimensions.

I think that this aesthetic affinity is one grounded in a materialist nihilism of *no* that (if it goes far enough) can perform a metamorphosis of total data (subject to the flickering formative forces of emergence) into an all-embracing *yes* of delicate abhorrence. In philosophy, systems theory and science, emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions. Emergence is central to the theories of integrative levels and of complex systems and I think that it is right for art now too as a way of turning the tables on big data.

So I have been advocating recently not the passive and thus incomplete nihilism of totalized form, but a generative and virulent and curative nihilism that unleashes forces of reverberation to emerge and resonate like a web of interconnected, molecular and viral relational affects and intensities that traffic in dissonance, deviation, and the incidental.

*EDWIN KELLY: Regarding emergence and metamorphosis, would this be the point at which noise becomes noise art? Or is such a distinction necessary?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: Indeed that is it! I think that I first fully grasped that distinction when I saw the obscure no wave performer Boris Policeband do his screechy thing in 1978 at a no wave concert to benefit Colab's *X Magazine*. It was entrancing for me how he took off from police scanner radio transmissions, entwining them with his dissonant violin and hilarious voice. After Rhys Chatham, his brand of post-minimalism may have had the greatest influence on my striving for my own form of post-minimal chaos magic, an art of magical gazing.

That year I had been reading Aleister Crowley's book *Magick in Theory and Practice*. What I conjectured from Crowley while listening and watching Boris Policeband, was that a noisy aesthetic visualization process could be used to feedback optic stimulus to the neocortex in a kind of cop free project of foreseeing - an attempt to scan into an un-policed future, based roughly on the basis of magical gazing. Noise metamorphosis became useful to me in rousing the psyche, so as to provide entry into the imaginable emergent cop-free world. It especially worked for me when art noise is also understood as an expanded psychic thermidor: when it takes us back from the edge and rounds out our sensibilities as it forces us to get with the underlying assumptions of excess inherent in noise.

*EDWIN KELLY: George Szirtes said in his interview - "I think I am primarily a language person, secondarily visual and thirdly aural." which is unsurprising, given he is a poet. In your work, there are points at which the visual and aural are given equal status, if that is the correct term, or, to put it another way, noise can be visual, aural, or both. Language, from my knowledge of your work, is rarely to the fore in your output (though it is present - Ovid etc) but, paradoxically, your writings form an important underpinning to your explorations and appreciation of your art. Can noise/noise art be linguistic?*

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: I don't see an easy bond between language and noise. For me, an art of noise must be postulated as a realm of antisocial cultural purpose

directed toward the revolutionary transformation of an irrational social reality that insists on calling itself rational. It seems to me that language has too much social cultural purpose attached to it, whereas visual art and sound or music are just non-purposefully abstract enough already to handle that task, as Luigi Russolo first demonstrated and theorized. Of course, Kurt Schwitters in his *Ursonate* work did wonderful noisy language work, as did Raoul Hausmann, Tristan Tzara and others. Indeed the outlandish poetry of Francis Picabia has had a strong influence on my own poetic output, most recently the epic poem from this year called *Destroyer of Naïvetés*. But noise art cannot just be verbal or poetic nonsense, for example. That is why in the book *Immersion into Noise* I say very little about human verbal or written language.

I do examine there what William Burroughs called *the third mind*, based on Brion Gysin's rediscovery of Tristan Tzara's Dada cut-up writing method. Thereafter Burroughs used cut-ups in his books *Nova Express*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and others. Gysin, too, was responsible for the absolutely spectacular noise-immersive optical *Dream Machine* that he invented based on the sparkling and flickering of the sun through the trees. And I stress in the book how Burroughs influenced Gilles Deleuze's notion of the *vacuole* – an idea that is so important to understanding what I have to say in the book of social worth. This vacuole concept of noncommunication comes from Deleuze's *Postscript on Control Societies* where Deleuze's notion of control is connected to information-communication technology - a concept he pulled out of the work of Burroughs. A vacuole is like a sac in a cell's membrane, completely bound up inside the cell but also separate from it. Vacuoles play a significant role in autophagy, maintaining an *imbalance* between biogenesis (production) and *degradation* (or turnover) of many substances and cell structures. They also aid in the destruction of invading bacteria or of misfolded proteins that have begun to build up within the cell. The vacuole is a major part of the plant and animal cell.

For me, noise art (musical and visual), when good, it is like a fertile seedbed that undermines the hitherto clear, false distinctions between representation (identity) and the imagination by way of negating and recombining. Here, semblances are always already connected within a crushed and dark and obscure excessive orb, as noise art negates representations (and all they imply), thereby affirming a consciously divergent way of perceiving and existing. Such excessive artistic noise obstacles can therefore spawn in us a sense of attraction and affinity that communicates individuality in totality without forfeiting liberty. And this is the magic formula for excitement: obstacle mixed with attraction equals excitement.